



Town of Groton, Connecticut

Meeting Minutes

Town Council Committee of the Whole

45 Fort Hill Road
Groton, CT 06340-4394
Town Clerk (860)441-6640
Town Manager
(860)441-6630

Mayor Harry A. Watson, Councilors Heather Sherman Bond, Kathryn M. Brown-Tracy, Catherine Kolnaski, Deborah B. Monteiro, Frank O'Beirne, Jr., Rita M. Schmidt, Paulann H. Sheets, and James L. Streeter

Wednesday, November 12, 2008

6:00 PM

Town Hall Annex - Community Room 1

SPECIAL MEETING - REVISED

1. CALL TO ORDER

Mayor Watson called the meeting to order at 6:03 p.m.

2. ROLL CALL

Members Present: Mayor Watson, Councilor Kolnaski, Councilor Monteiro, Councilor O'Beirne, Jr., Councilor Schmidt, Councilor Sheets and Councilor Streeter
Members Absent: Councilor Bond and Councilor Brown-Tracy

Also present were Town Manager Mark Oefinger, Assistant to the Town Manager Lee Vincent and Executive Assistant Nicki Bresnayan.

3. Calendar and Communications

None.

4. Approval of Minutes

2008-0273 Approval of Minutes (Committee of the Whole)

RESOLUTION ACCEPTING COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE MINUTES

RESOLVED, that the minutes of the Town Council Committee of the Whole meetings of October 27, 2008 and October 28, 2008 are hereby accepted and approved.

A motion was made by Councilor Monteiro, seconded by Councilor Schmidt, to adopt.

The motion carried unanimously

5. NEW BUSINESS

2008-0235 Mortimer Wright Preserve Trail Proposal

Discussed

Town Manager Mark Oefinger provided a brief history of Dr. Bernie French's proposal to develop a loop trail system through the Mortimer Wright Preserve property. A number of Town Councilors recently toured the property. Prior to approaching the Town Council, Dr. French met with the Conservation Commission, which enthusiastically endorsed his proposal. The purpose of this meeting is to review the proposal with adjacent property owners and address any questions. The Town Manager is recommending that this item be referred to the Planning Commission. Although the project may not meet the threshold for a CGS 8-24 referral, it is safer to make a referral.

Dr. Bernie French addressed the residents regarding his proposal. He emphasized that his plan is for a 3' wide (not 12' wide) dirt trail designed for recreational purposes. The system would follow the recommendations of Groton's 2004 Master Trail Plan and there is adequate existing parking at the trailhead. The trail would be cleared by a volunteer group using hand tools. Dr. French has asked the Town for help clearing a connector to the trail system between 300 and 316 Groton Long Point Road. Dr. French explained that the trail would go around trees and rocks whenever possible and no motorized vehicles are proposed. He reviewed maps of the property showing existing and proposed trails.

Councilor Sheets received a call from Sidney VanZandt who would like the Council to know that there is potentially hunting taking place on the property. Also there is a felled tree from a parcel (Weber) that obstructs an existing path.

Mayor Watson asked citizens wishing to speak to come forward.

Bobby Jo Cini, 316 Groton Long Point Road, expressed concern with use of the trails by horses. She asked if the Inland Wetlands Agency was consulted about the plan. Ms. Cini feels that the narrow trail is not safe. She spoke to John Carey of the State DOT who indicated that any interconnecting trails crossing the state road would require a permit. Ms. Cini asked about the cost to the Town and taxpayers. She reiterated her concerns with horse manure on the trails and the proximity to her well. She also feels that it is not safe to cross Route 215 in the area of Brook Street.

Leo Gibson, 478 Brook Street, expressed concern with the safety of the Groton Long Point Road/Brook Street intersection.

The Council asked staff to obtain an accident report from the Chief of Police for that area of Route 215.

Joan Warren stated that she frequently walks Haley Farm and she is supportive of any effort to maintain open space. She supports a minimally invasive trail. The trail does not necessarily cross the road. Ms. Warren thinks it would be wonderful to have a more clearly defined trail.

Frank Jannarone, 360 Groton Long Point Road, feels that speed on the road is an issue and he thinks the trail is a bad idea. He suggested that there are more wetlands on the property than shown on the map. Mr. Jannarone expressed concern with steep areas prone to erosion.

Clayburn VanZandt stated he is a hiker and biker. He shares the concerns of the property owners with traffic and asked the Town to consider a speed limit reduction. Mr. VanZandt encouraged the Town Council to support the proposal.

Steve Fagin, a Ledyard resident, stated that he is a hiker and runner, and he wholeheartedly endorses expansion of trails.

Councilor Monteiro noted there is an existing southerly access to the property, so that if people are determined to go onto the property, they will cross the road whether the new connector is built or not. As one of the Councilors that toured the property, Councilor Monteiro noted that she only saw two areas of horse droppings. She asked if use of the trail could be limited if it is that much of a concern. Councilor Sheets suggested that horse owners be required to clean up after their animals.

Councilor Streeter expressed support for the idea of extending the trail, but perhaps using the existing entrance since the proposed new connector is in a difficult area.

Councilor Schmidt asked about the existing parking and Dr. French noted that approximately six cars can be accommodated.

Councilor Kolnaski asked if this proposal could be referred to the Inland Wetlands Agency and State DOT. Town Manager Oefinger stated that if the Council is supportive of the concept, the plan can be sent to the Planning Commission and Inland Wetlands Agency for review. However, the two groups will need a definitive layout of the trail to allow them to provide useful comments. The trail can be marked in the field to be reviewed with the Environmental Planner. The intent

with any trail is to try to avoid wetlands. With respect to DOT and traffic speeds, the Traffic Authority has asked the State Traffic Commission to review the speeds on Groton Long Point Road on three or four occasions. The local Traffic Authority feels the speed should be lowered, but the state has denied all requests. Staff can ask about the need for a permit for the proposed trail system.

Mayor Watson polled Councilors and there was unanimous support of the trail concept. The Council asked that the proposal be referred to the Planning Commission and Inland Wetlands Agency.

2008-0266**Human Services Department - Discussion of Anticipated Needs****Discussed**

Marge Fondulas, Director of Human Services, introduced members of her staff. She noted an influx of clients with the state of the economy affecting all divisions of Human Services. When the state started handling general assistance, it provided an opportunity for the Town to do actual social work. Efforts today are focused on trying to maintain equilibrium in the community and address housing needs, joblessness, and food.

Debbie Burke, Social Worker, sees a difference in the type of client that she is seeing, with more middle income people coming in who have lost jobs and are at the end of their resources. Ms. Burke feels that this generation is not prepared for tough times and in general has no savings and no family support.

Vicki Wylder, Social Worker, added that the entire department is struck by the middle class families who have historically lived within their means, but now are completely overwhelmed economically. There are no jobs and there are no resources and they are losing everything. Ms. Fondulas noted another trend where all three divisions are now involved with the same family. Human Services is now providing more "wraparound" services.

Jen Sanford, Youth and Family Counselor, looked at the statistics kept by her division for the state. In the past year, the division saw for the first time 10% of its clients affected by homelessness. There has been a 20% increase in kids involved or potentially involved with juvenile court. The school system continues to be the largest referral system even though the school's internal services have increased. There has been a 20% increase in children in single parent homes and communication with those parents has eroded such that there is an increased need to rely on the legal system and appointment of guardians ad litem. Youth and Family Counselors also act as case managers for the Juvenile Review Board and do more client intake.

Steve Pulaski, Youth and Family Counselor, noted the increase in the number of children in homeless situations. He feels that Groton's Human Services Department has a unique ability to address those situations because of its collaboration with other agencies. Many families are under economic strain. Stressors have increased and coping abilities have decreased.

Diane Schrage, counselor at the Family Support Center, works with adults on parenting issues. She noted that the severity of cases has increased. She sees parents that are working two or more jobs and it is difficult to find time for their children so the children's needs are not being met. Ms. Schrage is also seeing a lot of unemployment and there are no jobs available. One of the biggest trends is that they are now seeing parents of all socio-economic classes coming in. In addition, there are many different types of and more severe disorders being diagnosed while services are disappearing. Fathers as well as mothers are now calling for services, which is not the norm. Another trend is parents wanting to be a "friend" to their children and supplying cell phones and computers to the detriment of the children and at a loss to family time. Ms. Schrage noted the success of the grandparents raising grandchildren classes.

Ms. Fondulas added that the department is seeing more families who are unable to deal with seniors in the family. Social workers are now going out as caseworkers and stepping into situations affecting the elderly because there are no other agencies stepping up to the plate.

Councilor Monteiro asked if the Navy offers any support services. Ms. Schrage noted the Navy's services are limited and Navy personnel are afraid that if they access the services, it will get back to their commanding officers and affect their careers. Ms. Burke added that in a divorce or separation situation, the non-Navy family member has a very short amount of time to leave the home. There is very little support in the case of mental health issues.

Councilor Sheets asked for some statistics on the number of cases opened and reopened. Ms. Fondulas noted that Human Services deals with evictions rather than foreclosures. Councilor Sheets requested an update on foreclosures from the Town Clerk.

It was noted that monetary contributions can be made to Groton Human Services or donations can be made directly to the Groton Food Locker including frozen foods.

2008-0260 Integrated Pavement Management Program

Discussed

Councilors received a list of roads (Town, City and Groton Long Point) ranked by Pavement Condition Index. Public Works will be asked to attend a future meeting to discuss this item in more detail.

2008-0268 Groton Education Foundation Grant

A motion was made by Councilor Kolnaski, seconded by Councilor Monteiro, that this matter be Recommended for a Resolution.

The motion carried unanimously

2008-0280 Children First Groton (CFG) Grant

A motion was made by Councilor Sheets, seconded by Councilor Kolnaski, that this matter be Recommended for a Resolution.

The motion carried unanimously

2008-0269 Adoption of 2009 Group I Regular Meeting Schedule

A motion was made by Councilor Kolnaski, seconded by Councilor Schmidt, that this matter be Recommended for a Resolution.

The motion carried unanimously

2008-0270 Adoption of 2009 Group II Regular Meeting Schedule

A motion was made by Councilor Kolnaski, seconded by Councilor Schmidt, that this matter be Recommended for a Resolution.

The motion carried unanimously

2008-0271 Adoption of 2009 Committee of the Whole Regular Meeting Schedule

A motion was made by Councilor Kolnaski, seconded by Councilor Schmidt, that this matter be Recommended for a Resolution.

The motion carried unanimously

2008-0272 Adoption of 2009 Town Council Regular Meeting Schedule

A motion was made by Councilor Kolnaski, seconded by Councilor Schmidt, that this matter be Recommended for a Resolution.

The motion carried unanimously

2008-0247 Budget Guidelines for FYE 2010

Discussed

As requested, Councilor Monteiro identified a number of areas where she personally feels that

budget reductions could be made. However, she proposed that the Council have one or two workshops on Saturdays to go over individual Councilor's ideas to arrive at a consensus to give the Town Manager suggestions. She noted that the Town does not know what the revenues from the state will be so she does not want to tie the Town Manager's hands with a percent figure. Councilor Monteiro suggested that the meetings be held by the end of November/early December.

A motion was made by Councilor Monteiro, seconded by Councilor Kolnaski, to conduct one or two workshops with the Town Manager (and other Town staff if desired) to consider budget guidelines.

Councilor Streeter concurred with Councilor Monteiro and also identified specific areas where he would like to see cuts such as capital improvement projects. Councilor Streeter recommended two resolutions: the first, putting an immediate freeze on hiring and requiring the Town Manager to justify any hiring; and the second, instituting a 25% reduction in overtime in all departments. The consensus was to discuss Councilor Streeter's recommendation at the Saturday session(s).

Councilor Sheets distributed her recommendations and reviewed them for the Council.

Councilor O'Beirne feels that a workshop would constitute micromanaging and would require that all department heads come in and review the details of their budgets. He feels the Council needs to give the Town Manager a target figure. He added that the RTM is also looking at providing budget guidance.

Councilor Monteiro noted that the purpose of the workshop(s) is to review Town Councilors' recommendations and to reach a consensus, which is what the Town Manager is asking for. Past practice has not been successful. It is the Council's responsibility to identify the cuts, which will hopefully avoid the emotional blackmail that leads to funds being restored.

Councilor O'Beirne noted that all nine Councilors will not agree on what should be cut.

Councilor Schmidt feels that Councilor Monteiro's suggestion is of great value. Councilor Sheets maintains her preference for the alternative budgets, but supports a workshop for Councilors and the Town Manager to identify overlapping recommendations which would advance the process.

The motion carried by the following vote:

Votes: In Favor: 6 - Mayor Watson, Councilor Kolnaski, Councilor Monteiro, Councilor Schmidt, Councilor Sheets and Councilor Streeter

Opposed: 1 - Councilor O'Beirne, Jr.

A motion was made by Councilor Streeter, seconded by Councilor Sheets, to recommend a resolution putting an immediate freeze on hiring and requiring the Town Manager to justify any hiring, and a resolution instituting a 25% reduction in overtime in all departments.

Councilor O'Beirne expressed concern that there is no information available nor has there been any discussion on current vacancies. Mayor Watson cited the example of a police officer working at a construction site who is paid overtime, but eventually those costs are recouped. Councilor Schmidt expressed concern with delaying potentially critical hirings. Councilor Monteiro reiterated her feeling that the suggestions should be discussed at the Saturday session(s).

The motion failed by the following vote:

Votes: In Favor: 2 - Councilor Sheets and Councilor Streeter

Opposed: 5 - Mayor Watson, Councilor Kolnaski, Councilor Monteiro, Councilor O'Beirne, Jr. and Councilor Schmidt

6. ADJOURNMENT

A motion was made by Councilor Kolnaski, seconded by Councilor Streeter, to adjourn the meeting at 8:04 p.m.

The motion carried unanimously.